Interview with Antonia Stearns

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Foreign Service Spouse Series

ANTONIA STEARNS

Interviewed by: Joan Bartlett

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Q: This is an interview with Antonia Stearns on November 14, 1990 at her house in Framingham, Massachusetts. The interviewer is Joan Bartlett.

Let's begin by talking about your early years. First of all, where did you grow up?

STEARNS: I was born in Washington, DC but spent many years in western Europe because my father was also in the Foreign Service. I lived with my parents in Berlin before World War II, spent the war years in Washington, and then went overseas again right after World War II, principally to Germany and France. I went to Goucher College in Baltimore, Maryland, and then went overseas in early 1958 because I wanted to spend a month visiting my parents who were then stationed in Athens. I ended up staying there for five years because that's where I met and then married my husband who was a junior officer at the Embassy.

Q: You were married in Athens?

STEARNS: We were married in Athens because it was easier, and because we had by then known each other for a year, and because of the happy circumstance for us, and unhappy for my father, that he was transferred out of Greece in 1959. Therefore we were able to marry and stay on because in those days, and perhaps now, you cannot have a

son-in-law working in the same Embassy as an Ambassador. My parents' transfer meant that we could immediately marry, and start life in Athens on our own. I moved out of the big American Embassy residence, and into a more modest love nest with my husband and we remained there for another four to five years. We left in early 1963.

Q: And your parents were there for the wedding?

STEARNS: Illness prevented their appearance. Although they had planned to come — and indeed, because of their coming the wedding had taken on aspects of a diplomatic circus — my father had a heart attack three weeks before the wedding. My mother stayed by his side during this crisis but urged us to go on with the ceremony as planned. Monty and I were married in front of many people who knew my parents far better than they knew us. But the point of this domestic drama, which ended happily with my father's recovery, is that our meeting and marriage in Greece created long and lasting ties to a country in which we served three times in all.

Q: Then you stayed there after you were married for four more years?

STEARNS: Yes. We had known each other one year, and then were in Athens for four years married, making a total of five.

Q: Let's come back later to those other postings in Athens and find out what happened to you in between. Did you have any children when you were in Greece?

STEARNS: Not in Greece, no. As a matter of fact when we left Greece I was a bit anxious because I hadn't had any. I don't mean to keep coming back to Greece but that is where we eventually adopted a child, a baby boy, in the summer of 1965. I was then pregnant constantly for three years. We ended up having four children in four countries between 1965 and 1969.

Q: So before that wonderful period, which was so full of new little faces, where did you go after your first four years in Athens?

STEARNS: After Greece we were transferred to the Congo, now Zaire, which was newly independent as of June, 1960. We arrived in Leopoldville, now Kinshasa, in the spring of 1963. Monty's job was head of the political section. My first sight of Africa was at dawn, landing in a propeller plane on a vulture field that passed for an airstrip at Fort Lamy, Chad, where we changed planes for Brazzaville and then crossed the Congo River by ferry for Leopoldville. The heat, the vastness, and the utter strangeness of the landscape quite overwhelmed me. More than once during that first African posting I would wake up in the morning wondering what on earth I was doing there. It was a time of tribal wars and political upheaval, of chaos barely kept under control by the presence of United Nations military forces and civilian administrators. The other side of the coin was that I loved the whole experience. I would say it was the most challenging post we ever had. Certainly to someone raised in a European-centered Foreign Service it was the most eye-opening.

From a distance of twenty-five years one sees that the first years of Congolese independence carried the seeds of endemic problems as great as those created under colonial rule. But it was the early 1960s; Kennedy was President; we were gung-ho; anything was possible. If Nigeria, as the saying went, was the head of Africa then the Congo was its heart. It was huge — the size of the U.S. from the Atlantic to the Mississippi, I think. It was economically viable, with its mineral deposits, especially copper. It had vast potential. The Congo River, snaking through the country, would be its unifying highway. Poor preparation for independence would be overcome by crash training programs, infusions of experts, and learning by doing. The reality, of course, was quite different. No nation is born and nurtured in a vacuum. Tribal rivalries, vested business interests, and cold war politics all took a heavy toll.

Q: How did you spend your days? I suppose that's a hard question.

STEARNS: There were principally two things you were responsible for as a spouse: food and water. There was, of course, no PX. I'm always amused to find PX's where you least need them. Anyway, getting food on the table every day was a major undertaking. We often succeeded by bribery. Using liquor ordered from Ostermann Peterson we'd go around bartering with Portuguese butchers for rather strange cuts of meat, with bakers for bug-free bread, with market vendors for dairy products of unknown provenance.

Q: You traded whiskey for...

STEARNS: For food. It was a barter system. Everybody did it. I also spent a lot of time keeping the car running. If anything went wrong with it I went across the river to Congo-Brazzaville, the former French colony, which had all kinds of goodies — strawberries and cream, Camembert, and spare parts. It was occasionally a bit dicey getting back. The two Congos had a habit of breaking off relations and shutting down the ferries.

The river was a source of constant drama. A German Ambassador had drowned in it, and we nearly lost a visiting British official in a water skiing mishap. He and a colleague drifted downstream and spent the night standing on a small rock a few yards before the rapids. But accidents, crocodiles and bacterial infections didn't stop us from using the river for recreation. Water skiing and picnicking on its sandbars were our principal form of Sunday diversions.

I also spent a good deal of time hauling water from the city, where the pressure was high, to our house in the hilly suburbs, where the pressure was non-existent. All in all there was an inordinate amount of time just spent in keeping daily life going. But we were young and healthy and seemingly invincible. When I think about it now I realize that Monty had a plane crash and walked away from it unscathed, that I was attacked in the house by a hemp crazed intruder, that roadblocks and curfews were exceedingly dangerous to get caught in — I saw them as incidents that made great copy for letters home. It never

occurred to me to be the least bit worried. I didn't have any children then, but if I had, I think I would have been a bit wiser, a bit more cautious.

Beyond everyday life everybody felt that she had to help, had to play a part. We wives became active in creating schools for Congolese women whose husbands were being trained by private foundations and international institutions to run the country — the first administrators. We tried to teach urban skills to their spouses, many of whom had never left their villages before. So we taught French and English, sewing, health care for children. We taught — do you want to hear this? — birth control, much against their husbands' wishes.

Q: When you say "we", whom do you mean?

STEARNS: The international group of wives, who came not just from embassies but also from the UN, missionary groups, and the private sector.

The best were the black women of the Caribbean — Haitians, Jamaicans, Barbadians — as well as African women — Ghanaians, Nigerians — who had already made the transition from rural to urban life and who could talk to Congolese women far more directly than we of European stock. There were also American blacks with whom we became very friendly and whose presence made me realize what an unwitting but nonetheless segregated life I had led among my own fellow citizens. Remember, this was 1963. There were many ironies. James Farmer, of CORE, came out to tell the Congolese how the civil rights workers in the U.S. could take heart from the African independence movements, to the mystification of the Congolese audience which aspired to attain the relative prosperity of the black American visitors.

Q: Were the women an organized committee?

STEARNS: There was a sort of committee, but I think in every post you take on the coloration of the characteristics of that particular country, and we weren't that much more

organized than the Congolese were. But we were full of vim. And then we also had good fun, we really had a very good time together. I think because we did really feel that we were there at a time that history was being made, and that we were seeing a country being born, and that it was painful, messy, difficult, but that you could see hope. I'm not sure that if I went now that I would have that optimism. I'm older, and I'm wiser, and the country's older.

Q: You were there two years?

STEARNS: Just over two years, alas. It was considered a hardship post, although it wasn't always, but even so. At the end of our tour we were very keen to take an extra year because we felt it had taken two years for us to know anything or to make a contribution. But our successor was already in the pipeline and so we left, much as we would have liked to stay longer.

Q: So where did you go then?

STEARNS: We were sent back to Washington in the summer of 1965. I should say that as we left the Congo, we had by then completed our plans to stop off in Athens to adopt our two month old first child, Christopher. From the Congo we went through the court procedures in Greece,adopted Christopher, and then went home to Washington where Monty had been named as staff aide to Averell Harriman. I have to pause because I suddenly can't think what Averell Harriman's position was. He held so many posts in the government. Basically he was looking for peace feelers in the war in Vietnam. He was either the Assistant Secretary for East Asia, or Special Roving Ambassador. I was preoccupied with child care, and house care, and therefore I played no part whatsoever in what my husband did when he worked for Averell Harriman. He joined that legion of men in their grey suits who trudged off at 8:00 in the morning to the State Department, and came home at 9:00 p.m. I did not play an active role at all in the social and political life in

Washington. To our surprise and delight I was also pregnant. We soon had two babies, and I became a complete mother.

Q: Where did you live?

STEARNS: We lived in Chevy Chase on the Washington side in the third alphabet where we tended to go whenever we house hunted, partly because I had also lived there as a child and it was an area that I knew. It was also cheaper than other northwest residential areas. We lived on Morrison Street.

Q: You rented?

STEARNS: We rented. Oh, there was no question of our owning a house, it never came up. Well, no. It certainly came up when we were posted to Washington which was three times in 30 years, and I would house hunt. I would raise the question by saying, “Would you like me to look at houses for sale, and we could at least look into the question as to whether or not we're in age group, and of an earning scale that might make us people who could borrow money to buy a house?” And Monty would always recoil in absolute horror, and say, “There's no way we can buy a house.” And that was the end of it. Then 10 or 12 years later, we would come home and I would once more say, “Do you want me to look at a house to buy?” “No, there's no way we can afford a house.” We joke about what a nag I was, once every ten years.

Q: Well, you weren't drained by renters who were bad when you were overseas.

STEARNS: No, at least we didn't have that, although I never heard those horror tales. I only heard about people our age, with the same number of children, who were doing wonderfully well by renting their house, and by the time they came home they had already moved into a house twice the size of their so-called “starter house.” And I used to say to my husband, “When are we going to have our starter house? We're going to be 80 before we get our starter.” Well, this is it. Our retirement house is our starter house.

Q: How long were you in Washington?

STEARNS: For two years, from the summer of '65 to the summer of '67. And by the summer of '67 I was highly pregnant again. Monty was transferred to London to be the political officer in charge of African Affairs. London was such a big Embassy that there were regional jobs for Africa and Asia within the political section. The African job was actually a most interesting one to hold because this was the time of the Rhodesian separatist movement and the Nigerian civil war. It was also the time of swinging London, and King's Road, and the Beatles, and wonderful theater, symphony and places to go. We lived in Kensington in an Embassy house — a vertical house with a room on each floor — I've never been so slender. The kitchen as you came in, and basement, and then up one flight to the living room, and up two flights to our room, and up three flights to the children's rooms. You did everything at a clip. It was invigorating, even in the rain. I don't think I ever had to use our car, I just pushed a pram around. It was really a delightful post. I loved it, and I had our third child there which made three children under three. I hired an unmarried mother as my helper, as an au pair.

A soulful Scottish girl who had been kicked out by her parents when they found out that she was having a child. She went to London to have the child on the National Health Plan. When the child was two hours old, she went and answered ads for a job, and she happened to answer mine.

I have a very funny tale about that, because when I interviewed her, I had had our third child who was only a month old perhaps. It was a cold night, and she came in looking thin and pale, a scene out of Charles Dickens. We sat in the kitchen — on the bottom floor of the house — and I poured her tea. She looked so wan, and so pale, and I said, “What has happened to you?” She looked at me warily, and said, “I need this job ma'am, I need this job very badly.” As she was talking I heard crying, and said, “Excuse me just a moment,” and trudged up to the top floor where I found that all of our children were sleeping soundly. I went back down again, and we continued the interview, and then I heard crying again.

And then she said, “You don't have to go upstairs ma'am. The baby is mine.” She had put it in the bushes outside. I hired her on the spot. So we had four children in the house, all under three.

And yet, somehow — it helps to be young — somehow Monty and I found time to go regularly to the Old Vic, to the London Philharmonic, and to almost every corner of the United Kingdom. We entertained; we had a steady stream of houseguests and official visitors.

Q: She must have been good.

STEARNS: She wasn't all that good. But she was an extra pair of hands and therefore I could walk out the door if I had to go out at night. But in terms of energy, I think that I had more.

Q: So you did all the work?

STEARNS: No, we shared the work. we were like two mothers. But she had her own child, to whom she was devoted and with whom she spent a great deal of time. It was her presence that simplified things. She could hold down the fort when we went out — and she was perfect in one way because unlike most other young women of her age she was off men and had no desire to go out herself. She simply wanted a nest for herself and her child. We worked well as a team, but it was a lot of house and a lot of kids.

Q: And they all got along?

STEARNS: They were so little they didn't know not to get along.

Q: I don't see how you could even walk down the street with such a gang.

STEARNS: We had a pram for twins, Silver Wings or some such name, made by Rolls Royce. We put all four into it and pushed them around the Round Pond in Kensington

Gardens or the Serpentine. What a healthy life — daily walks, rain or shine, and don't forget your wellies (Wellington Boots) — well, those old enough to wear them. They were all of 2, 1, 0 and O. By the time we left they were 4, 3, 2, and 2. Too soon our assignment ended in mid-tour. I was quite heartbroken. I thought London was a sensational post, not as an embassy. I thought our Embassy rather cold, impersonal, and overstaffed. But it was a wonderful city to live in. Looking back at the memorabilia from that time I think, “Is it possible we averaged two nights a week at the theater?” Yes, we did, amidst all the other activities. Perhaps we knew subconsciously that our tour would be cut short, to move to Laos and to have another baby. We flew directly from London to Vientiane, which took something like 29 hours, into a whole new stage of our lives.

Q: Was this during the Vietnam War?

STEARNS: It was in the middle of the Vietnam War, in the summer of 1969. It was, again, a total change.

Q: What was he doing there?

STEARNS: Monty was the DCM, under Ambassador Mac Godley, with whom he had worked in the Congo as chief of the Political Section. Mac brought several Congo hands out to Vientiane, a city I had to locate on the map, not being sure how Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos fitted together. Laos turned out to be the only landlocked country of the three — very cut off, exotic, and — like all our posts — quite fascinating in its own way.

There I became a real Foreign Service manager. As the wife of the number two I had a big administrative job, a large part of it simply touching base with the personnel of a huge mission.

This was when I had to give up some of the private pleasures of exploring a post for its own sake and for my own gratification. Duty called in the form of committees, school

boards, official travel, and the like. Our husbands worked non-stop. There was a war on. On Fridays they'd say “Only two more working days 'til Monday.”

There were about a dozen embassies accredited to Vientiane including some who supported the Pathet Lao and with whom the U.S. had either strained relations or no relations at all. We had many Lao friends but overall there was an inscrutable quality to the life we led there — so much American activity superimposed on a quiet people. Come to think of it our whole tour there was composed of contrasts: noise and silence, extreme heat and extreme air conditioning, walking among water buffalo and traveling in hi-tech aircraft; too much talk with voluble Indian colleagues or none at all with the Chinese, next to whom I was invariably seated at official functions. After Kissinger's trip to China it was a relief to have my table mate speak to me.

Q: In English?

STEARNS: I think so. It might have been French. Whatever it was it was just chitchat. The real business of our all being there was not discussed — the war. That we discussed and argued about among our fellow citizens and western colleagues, not least the press who persisted in headlining it The Secret War.

As in all difficult posts we created our own fun — badminton on the lawn, excruciatingly hot picnics on the muddy Mekong, costume parties, and amateur talent nights. I took Chinese brush painting classes and learned the rudiments, as well as Lao lessons, which defeated me. I could not get a handle on the language. It had too many tones and not enough tenses. Since the educated Lao spoke impeccable French I could afford to give up.

Q: I don't see how you managed to fit Lao lessons in with everything else.

STEARNS: Well, nothing happened on time in Laos. If something didn't get done one day it could wait until the next. Despite the frantic activity of our embassy, domestic and daily life could be decidedly casual. The serene Buddhism of our household staff quietly

replaced my English nanny approach to child raising. Our fourth child, Emily, was born at the end of 1969. She was the only baby I had who was raised off a schedule and on a hip. I would go look for her in her crib, under tropical netting and overhead ceiling fans, and find the crib empty. Then I'd go wandering through the house, garden, and servants' compound in the back — avoiding eye contact with the chickens who would turn up on the table for dinner — and find Emily in the arms of the staff. She spent her days being passed from one to the next, from hip to hip. When she was about two Monty and I took R and R to Bali and watched an Indonesian ritual — after 40 days a new baby gets a lock of hair cut and is placed for the first time on the ground. Monty and I observed this solemnly and decided that when we got home, Emily should have a ground touching ceremony.

She was 3 years old when we left Laos and went to Harvard for an academic year. I was worried that she would not know how to entertain herself if left alone. She turned out fine.

Q: She was independent?

STEARNS: She was very independent then and is still so now. She was perfectly ready to be taken off the hip.

Q: She probably spoke Lao.

STEARNS: She spoke Lao. She can't remember a single word of it now. Languages which you learn that early, and which you leave that early, are totally gone. Our children learned Greek and French at a somewhat older age, and those have held. But Lao is gone.

Q: Did you think the morale in Laos of the Americans that were there, the ones that you were so involved with, was pretty good?

STEARNS: It was very good. There was a sense of real commitment. It was excellent. In fact, every hardship post had excellent morale, and every easy post had poor morale. I'm sure this has happened to you too.

Q: So you went on from there straight to Cambridge?

STEARNS: We were given an academic year at Harvard to breathe. It was not until we left Laos that we both realized how exhausted we were. An academic year for Monty as a Harvard Fellow at the Center for International Affairs was a perfect antidote, a time to decompress and recharge. We spent a lovely year right up here in Lexington, Massachusetts.

Q: Were your children in school by then?

STEARNS: The boys were by then between first and third grades, and Emily approaching nursery school age. We brought a housekeeper home with us, in a just barely legal maneuver, whose presence enabled me to audit courses at Harvard. I promptly took the basic East Asian civilization course created by John Fairbank and dubbed “Rice Paddies I and II” by the students. Three years in Indo-China made me realize how poor my historical knowledge of the area was. We made many friends in Cambridge, both permanent residents and other visiting fellows, and stayed in touch over the years since, so that when we moved here permanently we did not feel like total strangers.

In the summer of 1974 we were assigned to Washington (after a false alarm to pack for Niger) where Monty became a Deputy Assistant Secretary for East Asian Affairs. We moved back to the third alphabet of Chevy Chase for what we assumed would be a tour of several years. Monty was exceedingly busy making the case for continued Congressional funding for the war in Vietnam, but, as it turned out, we were there for less than a year. In the summer of 1974 the Greek Junta fell, after a botched attempt to set up a strong man in Cyprus. The Turks invaded Cyprus, ostensibly to protect their minority in the northern part of the island. There is a very complicated history to all this...suffice it to say that our embassy in Athens, which had done business with the Greek colonels for the seven years of dictatorship, needed to re-establish its credentials with the new democratic government of Constantine Karamanlis, who came back from exile to be re-elected Prime Minister.

While Cyprus was in flames Nixon was resigning the Presidency. A certain amount of confusion reigned in Washington. Monty was asked to go back to Greece as DCM.

Q: So there was no problem taking that assignment as far as you were concerned?

STEARNS: Oh, I struggled over it. Much as I loved the idea of going back to Greece I thought it a very awkward way to go, before a new Ambassador had been named. What if he got there and wanted a different DCM? I didn't relish a fourth move in two years. Well, it all worked out fine, and we were there for just over two years — too short, but better than two weeks. Athens, the second time around, was just as fascinating in a new way. The city had turned into a concrete jungle, but you could find bits of the old Balkan charm hidden underneath. We knew our way around, and hit the ground running. We kept our old friends and observed a new social and political structure evolve. The monarchy was abolished by referendum; a new, left of center political party garnered 25 percent of the vote (later to govern as PASOK, under the leadership of Andreas Papandreou, a former American citizen). There were new dangers too: rising anti-Americanism and the first acts of terrorism. But despite these we enjoyed all the aspects of life that can be described only as Mediterranean: sun, sea, cafes, excursions, picnics atop ruined columns, late dinners and late night talk. We loved it all, and so did the children.

The first time in Greece we tried to develop our knowledge of classical history; the second time around I concentrated on Byzantium. Most Americans know nothing of the Byzantine age, myself included. But once again, like London, our assignment was interrupted. Monty was asked to go as Ambassador to the Ivory Coast, another country I had to look up on the map. You are supposed to be delighted when your husband gets an ambassadorship but I didn't want to leave Greece. I caught the airplane in tears, but then I always do that. I left the Ivory Coast in tears. It was a good post.

Q: Were you there two years?

STEARNS: No, three, from '76 to '79. The children came with us. Also three Greek cats. We knew there were good French language schools in Abidjan, and thought it a good time, before high school age, for them to study in French. But we learned quickly that an Ambassador's family cannot always lead a life of its own. The director of the small American International School of Abidjan greeted us on the tarmac of the airport with expressions of delight that we would swell the ranks of his struggling school. We had to give some sign of support, so we enrolled two children there, and two in a French school. I won't tell you how we made our choice or how many arguments ensued over the years as to who got a raw deal. The two at the American school were out by lunch time and spent the afternoons splashing in our pool. The two French students trudged back at 2:00 p.m. for more dictees until 5:00 p.m., followed by several hours homework. They were off on Thursdays but had classes on Saturdays. These wildly different schedules and standards passed for me in a blur of tutoring and car pools, interspersed with the usual embassy duties.

The best thing about Abidjan was that it was so normal. Monty came home at 6:00, and he didn't work on Sundays. He had time to see the children. We had a swimming pool. I think in a hot climate you need to have water the way you need to have a hearth in a cold climate. You need a place around which people gather. The pool was also used by members of our Embassy so I can't say it was all that private but it was ours on Sundays. It was lovely to have three years where I had a husband who was home for the weekends. We had to do a lot, but it was at a pace that you considered manageable. You could say, if we're out for four nights, we'll plan to be home for two nights. And if you wanted to do a sport, you had time to do it.

Q: Was it a very social kind of a post?

STEARNS: Yes, it was social. It was very cheerful, but also in a very casual way.

Q: Were there a lot of other international embassies?

STEARNS: Yes, there were other embassies and a large private sector. The Ivorians were doing very well at the time. And the Ivorian ruling class, which is what you must call it, lived well. We have never eaten so well. I have never lived in a post where I said once to my husband jokingly, “You have to send me to Paris so I can get the right clothes.” People dressed well. I thought I could slop around in an African mou-mou, but no, people really dressed very well.

Q: What the French left behind.

STEARNS: It is one aspect of what the French left behind: a great deal of style. We lived in an airy, open house, set in a garden filled with palm trees. It was perhaps the only time in our whole career where we had a very, what I would call, normal life in terms of time for each other, time for our children. And interestingly enough, our children also talk about that time with great pleasure and nostalgia.

Q: Did they make good friends there in the schools?

STEARNS: Yes, they did, devoted friends whom they still see.

Q: So they were getting on to be about in what grades?

STEARNS: By this time they were sort of fourth, fifth, sixth and seventh — I lose track. Certainly the two older ones were by then, when we left the Ivory Coast the end of '79, and came to Washington again, the two elder ones were freshmen in high school. I should mention that our two elder children ended up in the same grade only because, at one of our posts, they were in a school where the children were clustered, ages five and six, seven and eight, nine and ten. I think it was an English school in Athens in 1974. Our two older ones who were eight and seven were put into one class. And at the end of that they just marched resolutely lock-stepped, right up through high school, which meant that they entered college at the same time, even though one of them was only 16. There was a two

year jump down to our third son who was only one year younger. And then there was a two year gap between our third son and our daughter.

Q: How did that go? How did they settle back in Washington?

STEARNS: We came home under unusual living arrangements because I didn't have to look for a house to rent (or to buy). Monty was named Vice President of the National Defense University, which now incorporated the Industrial College of the Armed Forces and the War College. It is located in southwest Washington on the peninsula opposite the Jefferson Memorial. We were assigned a house right in Ft. McNair.

Our children were now of junior high school and upper elementary school age. The public schools in the area were frankly awful. My resolve to support the neighborhood schools melted away, on the not invalid grounds that our children had bounced around enough and deserved to get off to a good start in high school. We couldn't afford private schools. It was quite a quandary until we learned that the military at Ft. McNair provided bussing for Catholic children to attend parochial schools in upper northwest Washington. We followed the bus route and told the children to pick from among the parochial schools on the roster. So our rather pagan offspring spent two years under the aegis of the Church. It was a mixed blessing, so to speak. The two younger ones did well at St. Thomas Apostle near Cathedral and Connecticut Avenues. The older ones went to St. John's, a military school way up Broad Branch Avenue at the top of Rock Creek Park.

Q: A Catholic military school?

STEARNS: Yes, run by the Christian Brothers. They didn't like it all that much and they didn't do very well. Years later Jonathan told me that he picked it because he liked the gym. Both he and Christopher were at an age when any school seemed unsatisfactory. They were 13 and 14 and very ill at ease with their peers. Although Ft. McNair provided them with many amenities — almost like a campus — they felt isolated from their classmates at school. All children who have grown up overseas have a hard time coming

home, especially as teenagers. It happened to me when I was in adolescence, came home for my senior year of high school, and felt utterly cut off from a crowd which had known each other since first grade. I could see the same thing happening to our children. There's not much you can do about it except to tell them, “That's the way it is; you will be the odd man out, but it will all iron out; it will pass.” But, yes, our particular circumstances do impose hardships on our children.

Q: But they had each other.STEARNS: They had each other. They really formed a great nucleus, and although they had their usual squabbles, they were a very close unit. People often asked me if our children were ever jealous of each other, and I said, “I don't think they ever knew the meaning of the word.” Because if you ask them, “Do you remember when child number two, or three, or four came into the world?” They all four said, “No, we were just always four children.” I mean, I'm sure there was never a period where the eldest thought that he had been slighted because now there was a new baby. All four of them have no memory, except of four. That's one way to take care of sibling rivalry.

Q: I go back to this question, how did you spend your days? They were off at school pretty much.

STEARNS: They were in school, and we were poor.

Q: Settling back in Washington is expensive.

STEARNS: The usual schizophrenic life that we lead. We live extremely well overseas, and then you go home and you agonize.

I took a job. I taught French, and I tutored French. I taught in a private school, and I tutored with a little agency called Traveling Tutors, which helped high school seniors get through their language requirements, usually French I. It was a part time job, giving me enough time to do housework and learn a little tennis — there were courts across from our house and many patient good players helped to bring me along.

Monty did a certain amount of traveling — the military do love field trips — and public speaking, as well as overseeing the courses at the University, which serves as a meeting point for civilians and military personnel to learn about each other's professions. Mid-career officers from the State Department are selected to study there for a year, as are mid-level officers of the services. At the close of the academic year the class breaks into groups and travels to different parts of the globe for on-the-spot-briefings. We have often been on the receiving end of these War College trips. In the spring of 1981 Monty led a group through eastern Europe, and while in Budapest he got a call from Ronald Reagan asking him to go as Ambassador to Greece.

Q: And you weren't unhappy about that.

STEARNS: I wasn't unhappy, again, although I kept on saying to Monty, “Twice is wonderful. Do you think it's going to be a nightmare if we go back a third time? Is it really going to work?” And yet, and yet, I thought, “This is the point of it all.” Monty and I were really — and I say “we” because I really felt that I'd put in as much as he did — that we were Greek area specialists. That we did know, and we did care, and that we had something to offer. And I thought, “This is what it's all about. This is why 25 years ago Monty spent six months learning Greek for 18 hours a day in Athens, did not go into his office, but sat and learned Greek, because it should come round again. It should mean that, if you put the effort in, it's going to reward you.” And that's why I was very happy to go. You're always happy to have a post that you feel is right up your alley and, as always in Greece, at another critical juncture in Greek-U.S. relations.

Q: And you knew the house very well.

STEARNS: Did I know the house! I'd been married out of that house; I'd lived there with my parents; and now I was coming home to it again. And coming into it was really one of the most moving moments in our lives. We both walked into that house — sleepless, of course, after the all-night plane trip — and we both just stood there, “Can you believe it?

This is where it all began. This is where Monty courted me, and this is where we cut the cake at our wedding reception. And now we're coming here to live."

Q: You're probably one of the few people in the Foreign Service that has such a well rounded story as that.

STEARNS: A circular history.

Q: You were going home again.

STEARNS: For the third time. And it was everything that we had thought it would be, but, of course, our lives had changed so drastically. Whereas before we had scampered freely all over every single rock and cliff, we were now suddenly living in an age of terrorism and changed living conditions. Our lives were not always our own. Embassy work and life had changed so much that it wasn't always as much fun as it used to be. We tried to turn obstacles into pleasures by traveling as much as we could under the guise of making official visits and then taking an extra day. Occasionally Monty could escape from his bevy of bodyguards and policemen — which I thought was overplayed to the hilt, but I do understand why people think this has to be done. After all, we've seen many people shot and killed, including our own Embassy in Athens, three times. It is nothing to be flippant about. But I did tend to think that if we were swimming in some private rocky cove on a practically empty island, that we didn't need to have men wearing squeaky brown shoes walking up and down on the beach, and this kind of thing. Actually Monty was the one who had to be very closely watched, whereas I was perfectly free from over zealous security.

While in Greece I led my own life, drove my own car, took the children around, walked the dog. I was once told that I ought not to do it, in fact, by the Minister of Internal Security, and this was after there had been a killing. I just thought, "It has never happened this way." The types of terrorists who struck Athens, and indeed I think virtually everywhere, had absolutely no history of ever hurting or kidnaping wives. Nor had they done it to any children. And our children were now full-blown teenagers with their hormones raging,

they wanted to roam, like cats who had to be let out. They were loud, noisy, raucous, like teenagers everywhere. One blessing was that they could not drive until age 18, so we never had those frightful arguments about whether or not they could have a car, or even take a car. They rode the buses, and they all entered college without even a driver's license. So, in a way that was extremely healthy, although I know they were out far too late, and all the rest. But I thought, even so, this is probably a healthier urban scene than they would ever find anywhere else. They're not cruising the malls in cars. And they moved in a very international crowd of Greek, Lebanese, Asian, African and British students. All in all, not a bad way to live.

Q: Were they in international schools?

STEARNS: Two went to the American School which, over the years, had evolved into a very international one, particularly after the outbreak of civil war in Lebanon. And two went to another international school, a smaller place, quieter in tone. This time the children chose by themselves, according to their personalities and not at all by the curriculum. At least it seemed that way to me — the extroverts to the flashier school, the introverts to the preppier one. That's speculation on my part. Monty and I were so busy with our own responsibilities that we often missed what was going on in our teenagers' minds. It is a time when they clam up anyway, and added to that barrier was our official life and artificial trappings...not that they didn't enjoy the glamour themselves!

Q: And at least you didn't have to do the double car pool.

STEARNS: No. I didn't have to worry about a thing, there were school buses, and, even if there hadn't been, they would have caught their own buses. At that point they were about 12 through 16, or something like that.

Q: So some of them must have graduated...

STEARNS: The older boys graduated from high school there. They went off, sight unseen, to their colleges, to which they had applied from Athens.

Q: Did it work out all right?

STEARNS: Reasonably well, but I think if I had to do it over again for all four children, I would have taken one summer and taken them home and talked long and hard, and seriously, about what we could afford, what they should be looking at, and simply devoted more time. I think we always thought that we could just wing it, something would turn up. And something always did. But I can't say that the two elder children were all that happy in the schools that they ended up in. They did all right, but they have often said to me that we should have taken time to really go and look at schools, and to talk to them straight, and said, “Look, you may have to work hard. You may have to get a scholarship. You may have to go to a state school because we cannot afford to put you into other schools. This is where you should aim, this is what you've got to think about.” We didn't do that very much, and I wish now that I had. As it turned out, they're all fine. But I don't think they were the happiest college kids that I've seen. They were all right, but they were not in schools that they just knew was absolutely right for them.

Q: And the next ones? They stayed on...

STEARNS: I still had two at home in 1983; the third graduated from high school in 1985. He too went off to a college without seeing it, and he too said to me years later that he would have welcomed more preparation about where he was headed. He also once said, “I'd like to know more about where we come from,” and of course that was the essence of the problem because we didn't come from anywhere. Our legal status was that of absentee Californians, courtesy of Monty's mother who lived in Pasadena. The children knew the area only as a holiday stopover, each time in a different house. They had a greater attachment to Cape Cod, where we had the use of a family house. It remained a stable point of reference for them long after we had stopped going there.

I think our children loved traipsing around with us and cheerfully accepted it as a given condition of their lives. They lived comfortably and well and gained a tolerant, worldly outlook in the process. But they were late to develop a sense of responsibility for their own progress because we didn't give them the time to learn cause and effect. Embassy life for children is a buffer. When they left it for college they had little notion of how to make decisions for themselves. I should have taken them home, and given them a long, careful look at colleges and at life beyond the Foreign Service.

Q: Sometimes that's hard. I mean for you to have taken a summer off for each one.

STEARNS: Yes, it is, and you can't always do it, but I should have started well beforehand by giving them time to talk more about themselves and their expectations. Our children entered adolescence just as Monty was reaching the peak of his own work and when I was also the most preoccupied. I gave them rules and regulations but not enough time to just sit and talk things over.

Q: Did they change schools after they were enrolled?

STEARNS: No, they didn't.

Q: They may have liked it better than you thought.

STEARNS: I think they didn't change because they didn't really dare. After all, we were still overseas, and it was rather awkward for them to just walk out. They certainly let us know they weren't all that happy, and we just told them that they had to see it through. “That it was important to simply finish what you start, and that, if you do transfer, maybe at the end of your sophomore year...” But once they'd gotten over the hump, then they were willing to keep on going. They've kept on going very nicely ever since.

Q: So you enjoyed your life there in Athens.

STEARNS: Oh, I loved it. Old friends, new friends, new history. I really think it is the most interesting country in the world. I really do, because it's like an onion. You can just peel off layer after layer. Whatever you do in Greece, it is never dull. It can be vexing, it can be frustrating, it can be enervating, it can be exhausting, but it certainly isn't dull.

Q: You have no regrets about your life in the Foreign Service?

STEARNS: No, I don't, I don't at all because I come from a generation of women who thought two for the price of one in the Foreign Service was normal, even flattering. By today's standards I was not liberated but I was certainly far more liberated than, say, my mother.

She was a very stylish personality in her own right but she was not politically curious about the places she went. She was there to set a good table and to make a home for her family. She also lived in a much smaller world. We went to continents that were still colonies in her day. And, in fact, in her old age she still says to me, “You know, I've never understood why you went to the Congo. I don't quite see the point of it all.” So there were enormous social and political changes between her globe trotting in the '30s, '40s, and '50s and mine in the '60s, '70s, and '80s. I think I had a far more independent outlook.

Q: Yes, but yet, you also didn't feel that you lacked a chance to have a career.

STEARNS: No, because I had not been raised to have a career. I think that comes later in our age group, after the children are out and launched, or you've settled in one place. Then you think, “Well now, let's convert all this volunteer work and worldly experience into a paying job.” And then you realize that you may have the equivalent of higher degrees in social science, psychology, and hotel administration, but you don't have a resume. No track record of a specific career skill. No efficiency reports, promotions, or awards. You have, as the obituaries say, “accompanied your husband to such and such posts.” When we moved to Massachusetts I did prepare a resume which, aside from the one or two

paid jobs I've held, looked to me like so much jargon. Stuff like: “As wife of the American Ambassador, entertained prominent persons in politics and the arts...” I think women of my age do well in interviews but if you're dealing with strangers you may never get to the interview stage. I guess we do what men do — we end up getting jobs through people who already know us.

Q: Do you have any feelings about how the Foreign Service is going to go now? And how women's roles in it are changing.

STEARNS: I have very mixed feelings about it. I really do, because I do recognize that our age is over and we can't bring it back. You can't conjure it up again. You can't ask a wife to go the way you and I did, where I thought it was just wonderful that the government sent me to the Congo, and to Laos, and to London. I thought, “I'm so lucky. I get to see the world, and it's paid for.” I don't think there's a woman in the world who would approach it this way, and furthermore, economically, she can't anyway. It is a two income household now. Certainly it was even when I came home and our children went to private schools. The wife has to work.

And women today have been educated differently. They expect to have a career and when they marry they do not expect to give it up for volunteer work abroad. But there is a real dilemma here, because for every Foreign Service wife who continues with her career there is another one laboring, at no salary, for the good of the Foreign Service. Perhaps the answer lies in recruiting Foreign Service people as couples, not individuals. Something really heinous, I think, a wedge in the spirit and professionalism of the Foreign Service, is to have a separate maintenance allowance for wives who choose not to go abroad. If anybody ought to be paid it should be the wife there, not the one earning income at home. I am not talking about those who must stay home for health or family reasons.

Deep down I think you shouldn't marry into the Foreign Service if you can't accept the conditions of the life. This is a problem that should be resolved before marriage. I don't

think you can ask the U.S. Government to resolve a problem that is intensely personal, and certainly you cannot expect foreign countries to do it either. You may have a portable trade — so much the better. But if you don't, and you can't practice corporate law in Upper Volta, you just have to work this out between yourselves. You can't ask the State Department to do it for you.

If the Foreign Service were to recruit and hire personnel as couples it would probably attract people who already have a sense of teamwork in place. Better still if they have a sense of adventure and a genuine desire to experience other cultures. Pay both of them, and get two for the price of two. I realize this could be an administrative nightmare if we get into counting canapes — some sort of bonus pay might work better, with the understanding that some posts will be more work than others. My overall desire is simply to reward families who work together and stay together, not penalize them for choosing a life that, for me at least, was richly rewarding in itself.

Q: Thank you very much!

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BIOGRAPHIC DATA

Spouse: Monteagle Stearns

Spouse Entered Service: 1955Left Service: 1987You Entered Service:1959Left Service: 1987

Status: Spouse of Retiree and FS Offspring

Posts: 1958-63Athens, Greece 1963-65Leopoldville (Kinshasa), Congo 1965-67Washington, DC 1967-69London, England 1969-72Vientiane, Laos 1972-73Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts 1973-74Washington, DC 1974-76Athens, Greece 1976-79Abidjan, Ivory Coast 1979-81National Defense University,

Washington, DC 1981-85Athens, Greece 1985-87Washington, DC Spouse's Position: Political Officer, Counselor, DCM, Ambassador

Place/Date of birth: April 4, 1936

Maiden Name: Antonia Riddleberger

Parents (Name, Profession):

James Riddleberger, Foreign Service

Amelie Riddleberger

Schools (Prep, University): BA, History of Art, Goucher College, Towson, Maryland

Date/Place of Marriage: September 25, 1959, Athens, Greece

Profession: Hmmm!

Children:

Christopher, b. 1965

Jonathan, b. 1966

David, b. 1967

Emily, b. 1969

Volunteer and Paid Positions held: A. At Post: The usual international community organizations; Teacher - Congo, Laos

B. In Washington, DC: French Teacher, 1979-81; Executive Director, Society for the Preservation of the Greek Heritage 1986-88

End of interview